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**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

**Peggy (Pinder) Elliott, 58, Grinnell, Iowa
Meredith Ferguson
Peggy's office in Grinnell, Iowa
4-12-2011**

Meredith Ferguson: I am going to start off by saying this is Meredith Ferguson. I am interviewing Peggy Elliott. The date is April 12, 2011. The interview is at Peggy's office in Grinnell, Iowa. The time is just after 10:15 A.M. This

interview is being recorded as part of the Iowa Department for the Blind's History of Blindness in Iowa, Oral History Project. Peggy, do I have your consent to record this interview?

Peggy Elliott: Yes.

Ferguson: Okay. Before we start with the questions, Peggy could you state your full name and the town and state where you live?

Elliott: Peggy Pinder Elliott, Grinnell, Iowa.

Ferguson: Okay. Could you state your age if you're comfortable with that or just the year you were born in?

Elliott: 58

Ferguson: 1958?

Elliott: I was born in 1953. I am 58.

Ferguson: Okay. Where were you born?

Elliott: Here.

Ferguson: Here in Grinnell?

Elliott: Yes.

Ferguson: Are you comfortable giving your parent's names and any siblings you may have?

Elliott: My parents are Al and Dorothy Pinder and I have 5 siblings George, Jean, Ann, Larry and Martha.

Ferguson: Current occupation?

Elliott: Managing Editor for News and Business at the Grinnell Herald Register.

Ferguson: Great. Okay. I just have some basic questions to start off with and then we can go into whatever you'd like to talk about, or I have some specific questions. Is that okay?

Elliott: Um-hum.

Ferguson: Okay. Could you tell me a little bit about your educational background? Where did you go to grade school?

Elliott: I went to Bailey Parks, all in Grinnell; Bailey Parks School, Grinnell. I think it was just called the Junior High. I don't think it had a technical name at the time. Then to Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School for half of 9th grade through 11th grade, and back to Grinnell High School for graduation. Cornell College, that was in '71, Cornell College, that was in '76 and Yale Law School in '79; graduation.

Ferguson: Yale Law School in '79?

Elliott: Um-hum.

Ferguson: Okay. What was it like going through school? Did you have, did you hire readers or did you use services from the Library? How did you?

Elliott: Until I went to the school for the Blind, I read print.

Ferguson: Okay.

Elliott: When I came back from the school for the Blind to high school here, I used Library services. My mom was my reader.

Ferguson: Okay. I know that you were in, you knew Kenneth Jernigan. So, were you always involved with the Department in some way? Or when did you first get involved with the Commission, or the Department?

Elliott: I went to the agency in 1970, in the summer between my junior and senior years in high school, and then back after high school graduation. And, I stayed there a year at the Orientation Center and I got done in February or March, or whatever, and I just worked as a volunteer in the Library.

Ferguson: Okay. Could you tell me a little bit about going to Yale Law? I mean law school's a big deal in general. I'm just interested in how, I guess, what services or skills you used in the classrooms and getting through school?

Elliott: Well, gee, what I used was my brain and my intent to graduate from law school like every other person.

Ferguson: Did you, I guess, for print materials did you have things Brailled? Or did you find other Braille materials where you were; how did that work? Or did you hire a reader?

Elliott: I used readers and taped books.

Ferguson: Taped books? Oh, okay. So, after Yale Law School, what happened? What did you do? Did you find a job or?

Elliott: I worked for five years as an Assistant County Attorney in the Woodbury County Attorney's Office in Sioux City. After that I moved here and opened a solo practice and worked from '85 to 2008 providing services to a number of organizations associated with the National Federation for the Blind.

Ferguson: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your first job working in the Woodbury in Sioux City? Was it difficult finding your first job, like, right out of law school? Did you run into any problems or any stereotypes or stigmas or was it fairly easy?

Elliott: Some people probably were not interested in hiring a blind person. I don't think there was any question about that. The Woodbury County Attorney, at the time, knew a blind resident of Sioux City by the name of Rich Crawford. He, actually, originally came from here and had established himself in Sioux City and was a, was then and is still now, a stockbroker. And, he was familiar with a capable and competent blind person. I'm sure that had a great deal to do

with his ability to assess me as a potential applicant without, necessarily, drawing conclusions about having a blind person serving as one of his employees.

Ferguson: Did you like working there? Was it, did you think it was a good job experience?

Elliott: If you want to do work in courtrooms, or think you might want to do work in courtrooms, the best place to get that knowledge is working in a county Attorney's Office, because you spend a lot of time in court. I thought I wanted to be a trial attorney. I was good at it. I did a good job. I didn't happen to care for it after I got to...I didn't want to do it for the rest of my life. But, I was, so, good experience? Yeah, I learned a lot. There's only one place to learn how to do a good job in a courtroom, and that's in a courtroom. You just have to start doing it. But as I say, I didn't want to ultimately do it for the rest of my life. So, it was a good experience, but it was also an experience that taught me that I didn't want to continue.

Ferguson: So, is that what made you open up your own practice? That you realized that you didn't want to work in the courtroom for the rest of your life? I guess, I should ask what kind of law you practice now, or what you did for the NFB.

Elliott: Oh, I provided a wide variety of legal services for the National organization and for many of its State organizations. It rarely involved courtroom.

Ferguson: So, is that why you opened up your own practice, is to have more freedom to practice the law the way you wanted?

Elliott: Yeah, and to work full-time with the organization of the Blind. That, at the time, was very important.

Ferguson: Was it, I guess, I am interested in how you first got started? Was it an easy process setting up your own, establishing your own office and contacts and doing all that?

Elliott: Oh, I don't remember, so it must have been easy. I don't remember. I can't answer your question because I don't have any recollection of the process.

Ferguson: Okay. So, you worked from 1985 until 2008, you said. Could you tell me a little bit about the work that you did for, or with, the NFB, either on a national level or on a state level? I guess, kinds of, what kind of advocacy did you get involved with?

Elliott: A lot of organizational building, a lot of travel to state conventions, providing advice and support to statewide organizations for the blind throughout the country. I also, for much of that time, served as the National Chairman for the National Scholarship Program, which gave over \$150,000 a year to 25 to 30 blind students attending post-secondary institutions. And, that obviously took a lot of time; administers a pretty large program, nationally, over the year.

Ferguson: I've heard that you were involved in some advocacy involving the airlines? Does that sound familiar?

Elliott: Um-hum.

Ferguson: Could you tell me a little bit about that? All I was told is that there was advocacy involving the airlines. So, if you could maybe expand a little bit about that story?

Elliott: In the 1980s, the airlines started refusing to let blind people sit in exit rows on aircrafts; and it actually happened one of two ways. They would actually move you, when you go to check in they would move you, and tell you that you would have to sit in the bulk-head row, which is the first row in the passenger cabins, or move you without your...You didn't want to sit there, and they would just do it anyway. Or, if you happened to get assigned to an exit row, they would come and tell you that you would have to move. This would always happen when the people were already on the plane. So, you were basically held up, picked out and required to move in front of all the passengers. Obviously, the idea being that you couldn't handle exit procedures if required. And, then they started expanding that to, couldn't have your cane with you at your seat. And, then that, in turn, expanded to, if you wanted to do something or didn't want to do something, the airline people would tend to become very rigid very quickly, because they would figure that was whatever it was that the argument was about, that was it.

For example, I wanted to sit in the smoking section one time, when they still had them. And, they told me that I couldn't because I had to sit at the bulkhead. Well, there is

no such requirement, but they, as I say, would just become rigid because they thought that was what the fight was about. They couldn't remember, they didn't want to go look; have a tendency to be quasi-governmental thinking that they're implementing for safety reasons what the government told them to. They are just people, so they get stuff wrong, and anyway they could. I said I could sit there and they said I couldn't, and they had me arrested for sitting in the smoking section.

15:00

Ferguson: Oh, wow!

Elliott: They dropped the charges the next day, but that was really, it was a very bazaar application of the conclusion that blind people couldn't be equal in a very highly regulated. With so many people in that system, they just couldn't get it right. So, they eventually then...It kind of died back down again and started. Until they finally figured out that they ought to assign exit row seats only at the podium at the gate, where they actually had the opportunity to see who the passenger was. That pretty much eliminated most of it because they, every now and then, they assigned a blind person because somebody is not paying attention. But, mostly there's no, you don't get assigned exit rows anymore. Eliminated by bureaucracy; what they'd created by bureaucracy.

Ferguson: Do you know what year that was you got arrested?

Elliott: 1988.

Ferguson: 1988. Okay. So, were you, did you get involved in the legal process at all or just through?

Elliott: They dropped the charges.

Ferguson: Okay. So, I was told that you worked with Kenneth Jernigan, is that correct?

Elliott: Um-hum.

Ferguson: Can you tell me, I guess, how you worked with him. I just know that you were familiar with him as a person. I don't know if you knew him personally, or just in a professional manner. If you could tell me a little bit about the work you did with him or with the agency?

Elliott: Now, the story of the agency in Iowa is an interesting example of how people can use government to achieve a fine goal; and how people can use government to not help their fellow citizens. It's a fascinating story, which kind of plays a key role and is probably mostly not understood anymore. It's too bad in certain senses.

Before he came, the agency essentially was, it was small. It was essentially run by people with vision and based on the idea that the blind people could not do a whole lot; generate a couple of employment options, but there weren't a lot. It was pretty bleak for blind people. Well, the blind people themselves had an organization that was an alumni organization of the school for the Blind where most people who were educated were blind. They advocated for a

change in that approach. It just so happened that at the time they were interested. This is a small state; there are not a lot of...

Because of the smallness of the population, they were able to reach public officials more easily and advocate for the hiring of Kenneth Jernigan; who at the time had been teaching in an Orientation and Adjustment Center in California and testing out some of the theories he had brought with him; wanted to test them at a statewide level. So, he knew about the advocates in Iowa. They knew about him and achieved his hiring here in 1958.

He brought with him the idea that agency for the Blind was suppose to, its task was to provide blind people with the skills and approach to become contributing members of society. That's easier to say and hard to do. Nobody had ever thought of it; nobody had ever tried it. Nobody ever believed it. And he did. And he decided to design all the services and put that theory to the test. He was right. Blind people can, as he said, if given the training to compete on terms with the sighted, and systematically found people to bring to Des Moines to train at the Orientation and Adjustment Center.

His approach involved, first of all, emphatic insistence on the learning of the skills, and that's where the sleep shades came from. He believed that if you're blind and have no vision whatsoever, you could accomplish most of the tasks that sighted people do with sight as efficiently by using a different technique. But, you couldn't do it as long as you still were attempting to use vision. And, there are two reasons why you couldn't do it. One of them, was you couldn't learn it. You couldn't become proficient at a practical level unless you did it, and did it, and did it, and did

it, which is true. The second reason is, you'd never believe it. 'Cause sight is useful. Sight is also the dominant approach. Everybody thinks the way you do things isn't efficient and if you don't...If a person with some remaining vision continues to use that vision while using so-called non-visual techniques, they're never really going to believe that the non-visual techniques are working, because they're going to think it's the vision that's doing it. So, it's very deep in the human psyche that vision is effective, and lack of vision is not. The sleep shades were the insistence that everyone who has poor vision...

Being legally blind is having 10% or less than normal vision, measured any one of three different ways; but typically most tell me two. But, 10% or less of normal vision means you have really crappy sight. Anyway, you may have a lot more, for example, more than I do because I don't have any; you have crappy sight compared to the sighted. And, your vision isn't going to allow you to do what sighted people do with theirs. But, without systematic drill you're going to keep trying. So, that was a very radical, at the time, approach. And still, by the way, is.

You have to learn the skill for blindness. You have to learn the practical level. Somebody who doesn't know how to read Braille, for example, is almost never going to get the kind of drill and regular use that sighted people get with Print, because they're not going to be driving down a street and see all kinds of signs. They're not going to see newspapers sitting in a kiosk. They're not going to have brochures laying in their hotel rooms. The volume of Braille is never going to be the same as the volume of Print in an individual's life, especially, if you learn it later in life. But, if you just give up then you have no literacy tool.

So, he was very insistent that you learn use of the white cane, use of Braille, and those skills remain needed today; absolutely vital today. But, he pioneered a different way of looking at them. Not just mentioning them, not just having them in some curriculum. Having them genuinely woven into a lifestyle that was effective on a practical level. Nobody believed that. And, by the way, most people don't deal with blindness today, still don't. They mouth the words, but they really don't believe it. So, his approach was revolutionary at the level of skills.

But, then he added to that the second layer, which is that you have to believe that. You have to understand that what all the stuff I just said was true. That it really does work and you really can do it, and once you walk outside your own brain nobody much is going to believe you. So, you have to take with you a sense of level of belief that isn't unreasonable, but is immune to criticism. And, you have to expect those generalizations. You can't go out with a chip on your shoulder, but understand that it isn't necessarily that people are going to buy it. You're going to have to sell it. It's not going to be understood and an assumed approach.

The third layer, beyond that then, is that you as the blind person have to take the responsibility to learn the skills, but also to learn them in real time; to figure out something. You asked me how I went to law school. And, it's like, oh, for Pete's sake. How many years am I going to have to keep explaining to people that you do what you do? The difference between what I do and what somebody else does. Sure, I do things differently, but let me tell you something. I'll let you in on a little secret. You sit down in your classroom next to somebody else, and you're both

using a pen and you're both writing on white sheets of paper, but you're both very different. The skills that you bring, the approaches you bring, the outcomes you achieve, the things that are important to you. There's a level of diversity between you and the student sitting next to you that isn't a whole lot greater than the level of diversity between you and me. As a matter of fact, you and I might be a lot more similar.

The three-letter word "how." How do you do something as a blind person? It's a thing that trips us up all the time. And, what Dr. Jernigan essentially taught was, don't let yourself get tripped up on that. Don't let other people allow the world to trip you up on that. Take the responsibility for overcoming it. Take the responsibility for teaching people around you; take the responsibility for figuring stuff out. If it doesn't work this way, figure something else out. It's your job to succeed. It's not somebody else's job to make success for you.

That third element, that element of personal responsibility, then is what led him to believe that blind people should band together and advocate for change and improvement in their lives. Things that they couldn't do as individuals they should do as an organization in the fine old American tradition of organizations. So, that was his approach and he conveyed that very effectively to a lot of people while he was here. He also, there was also a big thing he didn't understand, which led to unfortunate results. Two big things he didn't understand, I guess.

The first one was that, and this happened before I came. I came in '70 and this happened in the '60s. The first thing he didn't understand, was that there are some blind

people who really don't want independence. They genuinely believe they can't be capable.

30:00

Elliott: They can't bear the responsibility that the rest of the people in society do. They don't really want that. They are threatened and frightened by it; just can't grapple with or hold that level of responsibility. Well, let me rephrase that. Yes, they can, but they refuse. They use blindness, essentially, as an excuse to sit on the sidelines of life and figured that was the crappy hand they were dealt and they're just going to play it. Those people end up coalescing in what is now the American Council of the Blind, to oppose the movement of the agency of the Blind in Iowa. And now, I'm obviously telling you my opinion. But, now, people that I'm describing would not agree with that characterization of that. That is certainly my perception that; that's where the Council came from here in our state, the first.

Ferguson: And, they formed in the '60s you said?

Elliott: I've forgotten the details. I wasn't there myself. I don't remember. There was a dispute involving the school for the Blind, of which they were sensitive all on it.

Ferguson: Oh yeah, I think I read about this.

Elliott: It came to be known as the first event of war, which is a misnomer. The idea that the school and the agency serving adults should be run under the same overall supervision; that galvanized some people to organize in

opposition to the agency for the Blind in Iowa. Well, it's a sad day, I guess, when people insist that they want to continue to be second-class citizens, and again, they wouldn't say it that way, but I do. That's what they were insistent on. They wanted the school for the Blind, which was not then and has never been progressive, and didn't really emphasize responsibility, and mouthed words of independence, but really didn't believe it or ever model it.

When people insist on keeping something that's familiar to them, but is not actually producing positive outcomes, and using that as a tool to beat up on an agency that was producing those outcomes...So, that's where, that was the first group of people that sort of coalesced in opposition to, that Dr. Jernigan didn't understand. He didn't understand it. And, it remains true today. I've certainly met plenty of them. People who, for one reason or another, "I'm not open to the message." I mostly think that it's because they haven't heard the message completely. But, there are some people who have heard it and who really honestly can't accept it. My husband's blind, too. He knows some people like that, too. It's just too frightening. It's just too daunting. Anyway, that was the first group of people Dr. Jernigan didn't understand. And he tried. It wasn't that he didn't try; it was that they tried harder not to link to the message.

Then the agency, he stayed here for 20 years, '58 to '78. At the very end of his time, he was a very strong man. He was very determined, very persuasive. Not everybody likes that over time.

My computer over here is an older computer. It is a Windows 2003, I think it is. And, Windows has a tendency to, as you leave a computer on, they don't cut out all the crap as they change systems. So, it does what they call

accumulating defaults. As my computer stays on longer and longer through the week, it gets crankier and crankier because little mistakes happen in the background. And, they're not in the front, they're in the background. And, they continue to pile up, and pile up, until after awhile I have to turn it off to clean out its brain.

Well, somebody in a position for 20 years who is very effective, very strong, also is going to accumulate the equivalent of defaults. You might have offended this person. You might have hurt that person's feelings. You might have not done what this other person wanted. But, all the people that he helped, all the people that he provided opportunity to; the defaults kept accumulating. And, by the time you have been here 20 years, that just kind of ended up, there were enough people that between the disgruntled employees, that got a couple of Des Moines Register reporters all excited about. He was a nut, and a crank, and an idiot, and a bazaar. So, they started publishing every day, on the front page of the paper, articles about how nutty he was. Which is very sad for all of the good he did. It's very sad that his final year in Iowa was marked with that.

Anyway, when he left and the second great misunderstanding we had became apparent, because a lot of the people he had taught, and lived among, and interacted with and would...The objective would be, if you're doing it right, and which he thought he was doing, would be to teach people those three layers that I talked about; the skills, the belief and the personal responsibility. They would move out into the communities around the state, and become effective tax-paying contributing members in the communities out of the state. And, then they would continue to associate with each other to advocate on behalf

of blind people. That appeared to have happened. After he left, it became painfully obvious that a lot of those people never really believed in levels two and three, and had remained psychologically dependant on the agency for the Blind and on him as its Director, and on the strength, and the ability, and the excitement, and the success that he provided and portrayed. It became, sort of, painfully obvious that a lot of the people who had been his strongest supporters were his supporters because they thought they needed him. They were dependant on him. He never understood that. It was very sad. He never understood that his very strength led people to make the...It's not the same mistake the first group made. The first group, that I mentioned before, just simply said, "No. We can't be independent. It's insulting to suggest it. I'm not going to try."

The second group thought they were being independent, and mouthed the words and claimed that they were doing it. And yet, when the leader that they were following left, they chose to support and interact only with the agency for the Blind, rather than an independent organization. By doing so, in my opinion, did not honor what they claimed to have learned, what they claimed to have been, what they claimed to have been taught. But, also chose second-class citizenship rather than full independence.

That's a very polite, very objective description of what was a very, very difficult time. People who had been friends for life chose different sides. Deep feelings were involved on both sides. I'm believing that people I deeply cared about had abandoned their success and their belief in independence. They believing that I had somehow chosen

to attack the agency. And, by the way, you can literally still find people today that worked at the Iowa Department for the Blind who will, if they are being honest with you, say that my objective in life is to attack the agency; tear it down, destroy it. And, I literally know people who still work there who, literally, to this day believe that. It's like, okay, let me tell you a secret. I've been trying to do that since 1978. Do you really think that I'm that much of a problem? (Laughter) I must be pretty incompetent if I've been trying to do it for 30 years and it's still there. Not the point at all. The point is to take what Dr. Jernigan did that was right, and to take the misunderstandings that we had as the first pioneer in the field.

He couldn't have understood it all. He understood so much, so very much that nobody else could understand. People came to think that he understood it all. He didn't. But, to take the things that he got right, and to take the things that he got wrong and try to make the agency do what it should be doing, which in my opinion is what he thought he was doing. He thought he was teaching people to go out and be independent. That those people, by choosing independence, could then choose sensible contact with each other to continue to advocate for blind people. A very reasonable approach, just didn't factor in the weakness and vulnerability and fragility of people; how profoundly blindness takes away one's sense of self and one's belief that you can do anything. He did understand it, and yet understand how profound it was among the people he taught. So after he left, the agency has struggled since then, in my opinion.

In my opinion, the agency, well, and again I could. I'm not going to name them, but I know there are people there

right now, who are working there, that would say that after he left what the agency for the blind in Iowa did this...To take the truths that Dr. Jernigan discovered, advocated, however you want to put it, and wrench the nasty organizational dimension out of them so that the truths were revealed as sort of pure and not connected to any truth, organizational connection, which you can't do. You can't take a human truth like that and separate it from its organizational grounding; but they did. So, they believed after he left that they got rid of the messy human organizational part of the National Federation for the Blind, and they just teach distilled truth now. That's what they believe they've been doing ever since the mid '80s. Well, I can quote you Allen Harris as an example of why that doesn't work, and how that doesn't work.

45:00

Elliott: He told me shortly before he left, that they bring people into the Orientation Center and they teach them what they're supposed to, and people learn what they're supposed to and say the words they are supposed to. And then when they leave, they put the cane in the corner and say, "Just don't want to do the blindness thing." He didn't understand how that could happen. They were taught everything they were supposed to. People learned everything they were supposed to, and said everything they were supposed to; and he couldn't figure it out. The sad thing was he wasn't asking me for help, he was just describing something that baffled him that he didn't know how to fix.

I do know why it didn't work for those people. I've talked to lots of people who have gone to the Orientation

Center, since Dr. Jernigan left, and the Orientation Center does teach you skills if you want to learn. You can come out of the Orientation Center without any of the skills of blindness, or you can come out with all of them. The Orientation Center teaches you the words that all agencies use. And, you can come out believing them or not. But, they've lost the knack for getting down into people's souls like Dr. Jernigan. That's the hard job. But, it's also the necessary job, and it's also the one that gets messy because some people get mad, and some people get frightened. But, if you don't go down to that layer, you never really give the person the tools they need. Some of us can find it on our own. I might of, I'm not sure. I know my friend Rich Crawford did. He found it on his own. I know other people who live in other states that found it on their own. If an agency for the Blind's really going to do the job that Dr. Jernigan thought, and he was right about that, they've got to get in there and battle for every individual's soul. And, then they've got to step back. That's the other sad thing that the agency didn't do; that Dr. Jernigan didn't understand.

He modeled, retaining a long time connection between the agency and its clients or former clients. After he left, the organization, the National Federation for the Blind, stepped away from the agency for years and years. We did our own thing. We taught each other. We advocated stuff in front of the Legislature. We did speaking engagements in schools. We all did that kind of stuff and deliberately had nothing to do with the agency, because we felt that the pull of the agency was too, I'm not sure what the right word is. Tempting isn't the right word; was too magnetic. If you're always hanging around the agency, that's all you ever do.

That's all you ever think of. You never end up growing like those people who couldn't after.

So, we took the position that it was very important to be separate from, not attack, that's not the point. I never did want to attack, or tear down, or destroy the agency. It couldn't have been farther from my mind. But, felt that it was important to be separate from which is part of the piece that Dr. Jernigan didn't understand. And, we made the mistake of thinking, oh, when Creig Slayton left, let's see if we could bring a member of the National Federation for the Blind here again and make the agency strong again, like it was. So, we brought a guy here named Allen Harris, who was a very nice man. Turned out to be one of that kind of blind people who just thought the agency was all there was that blind people needed; just another one of those; very sad. Blind people can be so vulnerable and so fragile.

That's what you've got in Iowa right now. The ACB's an aging organization, essentially no young people in it at all. The NFB is a shrinking organization because all its eggs are in the agency basket. All the people that are active in the organization, almost all, are employees of the agency. Then that's the center of a blind person's life. Then there's two things I know for sure. They aren't independent and they're not going to grow. So, it would be nice if somehow we could find the path for the agency.

Iowa has been on every single path that an agency can follow. Being controlled by the sighted, control and effective work by the blind, and then that sort of middle path where the agency provides some valuable services and also provides a lot of employment for people who...And, that's the other sad thing. When Dr. Jernigan was here he told a story over and over. He said when he first got to be Director he

got a survey. And, one of the questions on the survey was, this was like a professional survey among professionals serving the blind. "Do you find that your clients are less grateful than they used to be?" And, the answer most people gave was, "Yes." This was in the '60s. He found the asking of the question was shocking and repulsive. The whole concept that client, that gratitude from clients was a topic of discussion, let alone more or less gratitude, he found that revolting. He could not allow his staff to even consider or be asked for or accept gratitude. They were doing a job. And, believe me, they're paid well for the job that they do. To expect gratitude, and to expect praise on top of that; and then when you add into that the clients are fragile, and the vulnerable people who desperately need work. Their lives are validated. You find staff people demanding validation from the blind people. It's just so twisted. And yet, unfortunately, that's one of the things that's crept back in these days.

I go in there. I go to things involving the agency; I hear about the agency. What I hear is how great the staff is. How great the staff, how great the staff. And, you know what? That's wrong. That's just way wrong. In this psychological landscape that's the last thing people should be talking about. I wish we could find that path that the agency serves the role of teacher, and open their doors to the future and get her out of the way, and takes pride in blind people that move into society and away from them. Because that's their job. There, that's what I have to say about that.

Ferguson: Okay. You mentioned in there that you, I don't know if you meant that you personally urged the agency, but

advocating from the legislature. Can you think of any specific pieces that you were personally involved in, or anything you can think of or remember?

Elliott: Two come immediately to mind. One of them has to do with the agency, and one of them doesn't. The agency for the blind is a separate agency, and in the early to mid-'80s there was a big reorganization. The agency was placed as a division of a larger agency. We were just furious at the time because there was a Director after Dr. Jernigan, was a man named John Taylor. In my opinion, he was also blind, but he was a weak man; a very vain man. He told the legislature that...And somebody asked him, "If the agency for the blind was going to be placed in some larger agency, which would you rather have it in, this one or that one?" And he answered the question, and we were all just enraged. Because we should just keep saying, "No." You should keep saying, "No." You should never answer a question like that. And, he was so flattered to be asked the question and he gave the answer. And, then they thought they could get away with it.

So, they reorganized the agency out of existence. So, we spent a year getting it dragged back out and then reestablish it as a separate agency. I suspect the powers that be and the agency history probably says that the agency achieved that, but I can tell you who was up at the legislature. It was blind people from around the state associated with the National Federation for the Blind that went and did the on the ground advocacy.

And, the other one I remember, specifically, is a bill to embed a presumption of the need for Braille in the state instruction statement. This is subsequent enacted as a

Federal Law, but at the time we couldn't get the U. S. Congress to do anything about it. So, we started doing it state by state.

In the decision of what a blind child's going to learn, there's a document called an "Instructional Individualized Education Program," something along those lines. And, the child is only taught, outside the regular classroom, only taught what is listed in the IEP on which the parents, the teachers and administrators all have to agree on this very, very highly bureaucratized process, which is overly complicated and achieves nothing. But, the kids that have some remaining vision are essentially never taught Braille until they simply can't, literally, read print. For which, for example, happened to me at the age of 13; not being able to read anything. And, if they'd taught me Braille while teaching me print I would have had both tools available; then when I could only use one, that one. But, that just didn't happen, because everybody figures if a kid can read print. First of all, it's easier. Just blow stuff up if they can't read the little print. And secondly, it's too bad if a child has to read Braille, because at that point they just have to read the inferior Braille. Nobody thinks about the fact that if you develop the kid's brain and hands for Braille before the kid needs it, but knowing the kid is going to need it, then the kid's a lot better off.

So, we invented an Iowa law, that a kid is receiving services due to the lack of vision. It was presumed you need Braille, and everybody on the IEP agrees that it does. Typically, they all do. They all want the child to see or to some. There are the occasional parents who will hold out and will try to get the parents and occasional teachers. By the way, we were trying to get somebody on that team the

tool to hold out and say, “You know, the kid gets...” So, that went into Iowa Law and about 25 other states. By about that time the concept got well enough understood that it was also.

1:00:00

Ferguson: And, what year was that?

Elliott: Oh, man. I don’t know.

Ferguson: Was that also in the ‘80s?

Elliott: Later ‘80s or early ‘90s, I think. I think the Federal was, like, later in the ‘90s. So, I think, yeah, it would have, you know, been ahead of that.

Ferguson: As you were explaining you were saying “we,” like “we” were involved. Do you mean you and the NFB, or do you mean you and the agency, or just in general?

Elliott: Which “we” were you referring?

Ferguson: When you were talking about the Braille.

Elliott: Oh no, the National Federation for the Blind and I.

Ferguson: Okay.

Elliott: The “we” I identify with is fellow blind people. And, that’s another one of those words that got loose a long time ago. And again, Dr. Jernigan, bless his heart, he understood

the power of the word “we,” but he also didn’t understand how it could get so misunderstood. I’ve asked lots of people over the years which “we” are you talking about. Exactly what you just said.

So, many people think, and I wouldn’t remember; for example, Joy Harris, Allen Harris’s wife, who just plain didn’t understand any of this. Just none of it. She just loved being Director’s wife and that was about it. Standing up in the middle of the NFB of Iowa meeting and going on, and on, and on, and on about how we had bought new furniture for the pool and we really liked the new furniture for the pool and blab, a blab, a blab. So, she was talking as an NFB member to fellow NFB people about what the state agency for the blind had done with its money, as though this was all one big happy “we”. And, the misunderstanding is again.

Go back to that second misunderstanding that Dr. Jernigan had. All those people that, after he left Iowa, they discovered that they really wanted to be associated with the agency rather than with an independent organization of blind people. They thought “we” meant he was the leader, and they stood around and cheered, and that was “we.” And, they never have progressed to where they occupied the word “we” in their own brains. “We” was like the agency doing the work and the rest were cheering. So no, the “we” I speak of is; I never speak of “we” as having to do with the agency, because the agency is a state agency of employees who work for me. It’s not a “we.”

Ferguson: Okay. So you were involved with the NFB in the ‘70s and the ‘80s. Is that correct?

Elliott: And, the '90s; since 1970. I remain a member today. But in 2006, some of the members, some of the staff members at the agency, decided that they wanted control of the National Federation for the Blind in Iowa. They wanted to have it, so they could control it. They actually took the original motto that started out before Dr. Jernigan ever got here. The agency controlled blind people before he moved to Iowa. They decided, it's a different version because they're blind. What on earth would possess anybody to think that it makes sense for state employees to also be in charge of an independent organization that represents the people the agency serves? How completely twisted can that be? Of course, they put their hand over their hearts and say, "But we're members of the National Federation of the Blind." Yeah, fine. They worked at the agency. That is absolutely guaranteed to color your point of view. They decided to insert control over enough people, to control an election. So, I'm a member.

Ferguson: Okay.

Elliott: Mike Barber, who was an agency employee, is now the President. That's backward. As a matter of fact, one Curtis Chong, who also plays both roles, stood up at the last organizational meeting of the National Federation for the Blind and said that the organization needed to work harder to separate itself more distinctly from the agency. It was like, "Duh? What do you think has been discussed in Iowa for the last 30 years? You just figured that out?" That's interesting. I haven't seen any implementation of that.

Ferguson: I guess, I'm interested in how you were involved on the state level but also on the national level. Was it, I guess, you mentioned that you were President. Were there other offices that you held or were there any other organizations that you have been involved with?

Elliott: I served as National Second Vice-President; I served as Scholarship Chairman, which was a rather significant role.

Ferguson: What year was that? Do you remember?

Elliott: Scholarship Chairman, I think that was, I became Scholarship Chairman and also National 2nd Vice-President in '84. I was President of the National Student Division, that was a two-year term; that was probably '77 to '79. I don't know for sure. We had a student organization here, too, that I was President of the Student Chapter. It was pretty small because we were scattered around, and of course, I was an active member of the state. I served on the Board of the State, probably I'd say sometime in the '70s; and as President since '81 until 2006. Then I served as National Student Division for the Blind; I think it would have been '77 to '79. And at that time, the NFB had a slightly different structure and the National student President was ex-officio on the Board. I went on the National Board in '77, maybe that was changed the next year, but I was elected as a Board Member in '78 to '84 and then as 2nd Vice-President from '84 to '88. I think I was the Scholarship Chairman in '83, because the first year we gave out scholarships was in '84, and I had, again, it's a different structure now. I received a scholarship, which was "the Scholarship" in '76.

At that time, the single scholarship recipient went on the committee to choose subsequent recipients, and so I served on that committee for several years.

It became obvious that, we got a couple of scholarships just given, somebody bequest; two and then three and then four and getting a few more applications. It became obvious that we needed to pay attention to that. If we wanted to pay attention to that, we could build it into significantly bigger. I talked to Dr. Jernigan about that. In '82, we actually brought some of the scholarship winners to the convention in '83, and that kind of triggered the idea that you could just do this huge expansion; bring lots of people and give a lot more scholarships out. So, from '84 to '07, I was the National Chair.

Ferguson: Okay. I also heard that you spoke at the Republican National Convention? Do I have that correct?

Elliott: Right, in 1976, which was the first year Reagan ran in the determine campaign to become President. Gerald Ford was the sitting President, having acquired it from Richard Nixon, and I went as a Ford delegate. Ford was the nominee. Robert Ray was the Governor at the time. He was a great Governor. He was a great guy, but he wasn't the most scintillating of speakers.

He was the Chair of the Platform Committee that year. So, he was up on the stage talking about the Platform Committee, and people weren't paying the slightest attention to what he was talking about. Tom Brokaw came by. He had heard that I was, I think, I was the youngest delegate. If I wasn't, I was pretty close, but young, and a woman, and a Republican. So, duh, how could that be? I did

not fit these stereotypes, and blind. So, he wanted to interview me. I said, "That's my Governor up there talking, and I'm not going to be interviewed while he's talking." He said, "Nobody's paying attention to him." I said, "I don't care. He's the Governor." He said, "Well, I may not come back." And I said, "I don't care about that either. It's up to you." I was not going to contribute to somebody not paying attention to my Governor, which I wasn't either, by the way, because he was boring. But anyway, a sitting congressman happened to see that interaction, and appreciated my saying that I wasn't going to be interviewed while Ray was talking. And, sitting in the room then was a friend of Ford's, and sitting in the room while they were drawing around the room who might be a speaker. They tried to pick people who represent segments of the population, so I was asked if I would be a "seconder" for the nomination for Robert Dole as Vice-President. And I did.

Ferguson: That's kind of a neat story.

Elliott: They didn't win, of course. That was the year Jimmy Carter was.

Ferguson: And, you also served on the Grinnell City Council, right?

Elliott: Right.

Ferguson: When was that?

Elliott: I served for four 4-year terms starting '89, I think it was, and I think there was a one or two year interruption in

there somewhere where some guy ran out of the blue, beat me. And, I came back the next time and got right back on and sat right next to him, and we got along just fine. It was a total of 16 years starting in '89, but assuming a total of 18 if that makes.

Ferguson: Okay. Have there been other organizations or committees or anything that you've served on over the years that you can think of?

Elliott: Oh, lots.

Ferguson: Oh, I guess, I mean that stick out.

Elliott: That's...

Ferguson: Okay. I forgot to ask this in the beginning of the interview, but what was the cause of your blindness and at what age did you become blind?

Elliott: The cause was medical and the age was, depending on how you look at it, birth, 13 or 15. I always had poor vision. I lost a bunch at 13 and essentially the rest at 15.

Ferguson: Okay. I just wanted to cover that before I forgot. You've recently been appointed to the Department's Commission Board. Have you been involved with the Board in the past? I'm just curious.

1:15:00

Elliott: That probably depends on what you mean by involved?

Ferguson: Okay.

Elliott: I've certainly been to plenty of meetings. I've had plenty to say to the Board over the years. Sometimes advocating that it do something; sometimes advocating that it quit doing something; sometimes just there to see if it's up to mischief; sometimes probably up to a little mischief of my own.

I've already told Karen this. That after Dr. Jernigan left, "we" blind--when I say "we" I'm always talking about other blind people and me. Typically, in the National Federation for the Blind in Iowa felt that the agency was kind of going off on a different track, and not on a positive one. But, the access for citizens, the place where you achieve accountability, of course, would be at the Commission Board, and that always met during the week. If the blind people are to do what their supposed to, working, how are you going to get there? So, we very strongly advocated that every other meeting be on a weekend. That was done for a long time. They sure have fallen back into doing, in the last several years.

All the people that have been serving on the Board have also been employees of the state of one kind or another, state or federal governments. It's like, gee, but they apparently don't have any trouble getting any time off; but some people work, especially if you don't live in Des Moines. So, that's something I've, that's actually kind of important to me, is to make sure that there's access to the people who are the decision makers who are accountable; and there

should be other ways, too. I don't know what those ways are exactly. But, the people who are charged with making those overall policy decisions shouldn't be meeting in some sort of empty room, or a room that is filled with employees. That's, there's something wrong with that picture. But, that's what, essentially, has happened over the last several years.

Ferguson: Okay.

Elliott: I remember years when we'd fill the Assembly Room, people at Saturday meetings of the agency board. It was a different time. Oh yeah, I've been there and I've been not there over the years.

Ferguson: Well, I've run through my list of questions. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about or add that we brought up?

Elliott: Oh God, it depends on how long you want to go on. I've given you a lot of conclusionary statements and there's a whole lot of detail that fits behind them. I think that's probably.

Ferguson: And, if there's anything you think of later on or that you would like to elaborate more on, we can certainly do a second interview, if you have the time or the inclination.

Elliott: We'll have to see.

Ferguson: We'll have to see. Well, if there isn't anything else then we'll shut it off.

(End of Recording)

1:19:06

Deb Brix

June 9, 2011